**Introduction**

Having been written in the last quarter of the 20th century, *The Company of Wolves*, by Angela Carter (1940-1992), had to be a meaningful work for our times, and a very ‘post-modern’ one. Although it is widely argued that ‘post-modern’ may refer to either a continuation of ‘modern’, or something in so many ways distinct that it wouldn´t be appropriate to call it so. However, this is not one of the main foci of the present paper.

“Don’t stray from the path”, the girl’s mother says as she determinedly heads to her grandmother’s house. Carter herself strayed from the path of mainstream literature, and this image is both literal and figurative: the path through the forest and the path of life. Carter, never conventional, explores what goes on when you leave the path. For her, the cauldron of story has always been a witches’ brew, bubbling over with primal ingredients: dark and mysterious forests, ancient grave yards, virginal girls and wise women, wolves with glowing eyes. (DALGLEISH, 1998, online).

Much has been written about these questions related to *The Company of Wolves*. A dialog among some of the experts on Angela Carter´s works will thus take place since the main purpose here is getting to know this author better, mainly through the analysis of the short story which is mentioned in the title of the present paper.

**2  Magic Realism and Fantasy**

 In magic realism, ordinary activities and settings are infused with a touch of magic, mystery, or unreality which intensifies the story. The art is deeply rooted in everyday  reality, but has overtones of fantasy or wonder. The term has been applied to the literary works of authors such as Jorge Luis Borges and Gabriel García Márquez. Angela Carter is said to be in that category too, although categories should serve more the critics than the writers themselves.

The strategy of the writer consists in suggesting a supernatural atmosphere without denying the natural, and the tactic is deforming the reality. Characters, things, and events are recognizable and reasonable, but because the narrator's intentions are to provoke strange feeling, the explanations are not clear nor logical. Also, there is no ambiguity or psychological analysis of the characters, instead they are well defined almost in opposition, and they never appear confused or surprised about the supernatural.

The way Angela Carter revisited the fairy tales, especially the one about Little Red Riding Hood, here analyzed in *The Company of Wolves*, can very well fit this category. Moreover, as Sílvia Anastácio suggests, the narrator of the fairy tales is always beloved, and can be considered the optimal narrator. The secret powers of such stories seem to teach us that we must face the myths of the world with determination, arrogance and wit. Also, they say reality is magical and fantastic.

**3  Angela Carter: *The Cunning of Innocence***

 Feminist, leftist, iconoclastic, sensual, erotic or, for some, pornographic, disturbing. Angela Carter, like most good artists, can be all that and much more - an infinite web of qualities, good and/or bad. She was aware, however, of women’s complex cultural situation and of the image of women as an erotic object for men’s use, which had been constructed over the past centuries and was (is) still evident in her society. Despite all the improvement in the role of women today, she knew the feminists were not on the right path. Fighting against pornography, in the late seventies, when the feminists in London suggested the radical opposition to the use of the female body for the male excitement, and tried to prove that pornography was another kind of domination, Angela Carter came up with the idea that the problem of pornography was not exactly there, but in its reactionarism. The issue was in the conception of the predator and the prey, the one that eats and the one that is eaten. For her, the core of the question was somewhere else: in the notion that the only possible roles for women were the ones proposed by the *Marquis de Sade*, in the figures of the abused Justine, and of the sexually aggressive Juliette (WYLER, 2000, in the preface to the Brazilian translation of Angela Carter’s *The Bloody Chamber*, p. xxi).

            In her personal experience, she learnt what it was like to be a woman in society. One could say she ran away from her husband and British culture. She ended up working in a bar in Tokyo and writing in her free time. In the everyday struggle to be a female, as well as in her writings, she showed, therefore, a woman who chooses the right place to direct her desire, a woman who separates sex from love, who can even face sadomasochism if it is part of na agreed exchange between the partners. Wyler also points out that what Carter searched for, in her provoking reinterpretations of the fairy tales, for instance, was a woman who can use reason and feeling to the same degree, who does not necessarily have to be piteous, sympathetic, affectionate, or especially or even maternal.

            In *The Company of Wolves*, she describes the girl in the forest, heading to her grandmother’s house like this: “Her breasts have just begun to swell; her hair is like lint [...]. She is an unbroken egg; she is a sealed vessel; she has inside her a magic space the entrance to which is shut tight with a plug of membrane; she is a closed system; she does not know how to shiver. She has her knife and she is afraid of nothing.” As a matter of fact, she is longing to be deflowered; either consciously or unconsciously, that is what the reader can infer from the retelling of that story. Our time is not a time of innocence. Innocence has ‘strayed from the path’.

**4  *The Company of Wolves***

 In recent years, there has been a trend in the field of fantasy: writers have been revisiting the fertile world of myth and fairy tale and reclaiming that world, investing it with new life and energy. Writers have become fascinated by the bloodier, morally ambivalent aspects of fairy tales, and are now modernizing the old stories while simultaneously going back to their roots. Before this trend was in vogue, Angela Carter had been reinventing fairy tales for years.

*The Company of Wolves* is a good example of that. It is one of the short stories in *The Bloody Chamber* (1979), her last book, whose title refers to the Bluebeard story. In this book, Carter has brought together her fascination with the dynamics of female desire and her work on children's literature, for in this collection the grim quality of many fairy tales is fully explored in surrealistic meditations on such traditional fantasies (GILBERT; GUBAR, 1985, p 2.326).

            Innocence is put in question here. In *The Company of Wolves,* one of the three versions for *Little Red Riding Hood*, which closes the *Bloody Chamber*, nothing is what it seems, but the women, as Sylvia Plath used to say, definitely love the brute. The housewife who was once married to a wolf is somewhat nostalgic; as for Little Red Riding Hood, she finds out that the hunter is the wolf, therefore she cannot depend on anyone for help. But she does not care. She seduces the wolf, her grandmother's eater and a little nasty, but sexy, and he plays the fool. "See! Sweet and sound she sleeps in granny's bed, between the paws of the tender wolf." That is how the short story is closed. And that is perhaps what she was searching for when she insisted on going into the "the forest [that] closed upon her like a pair of jaws" in "the worst time in all the year for wolves": *all the better to be deflowered*, a werewolf would say.

**5  Conclusion**

 Those who stray from the path will supposedly meet with a dark fate, but *our girl* knew what to do. For us, ordinary people, this fate is literalized in the dream as werewolves, but the werewolves connote many things: death, sex, knowledge. If straying from the path leads to death, then it is not a good idea, but if that is what you have to risk to get sex and knowledge (and therefore power), then maybe it is worth the risk. And Carter took that risk.

She had an awareness of contingency as a disaster in the world of time: Yeat’s ‘*Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold’* (BRADBURY; MCFARLANE, 1991, p.26).” If one is unable to locate the center, and if the idea of a center itself is gone, the path is uncertain if there is one.

The work analyzed here is part of Carter's great allegorical adventure at the early end of her life. Her allegory may be seen as a symbol for a world of free sexuality for men and women. A world without pornography, because without puritanism. Without guilt, because without sin. Is that a dead ideal? A utopia that died with her and with a generation of hippies and revolutionaries? Only time will tell. Actually, time is starting to whisper...

... but that is another story.

# Fem Fatal and Freaky Foresters - An Analysis of Angela Carter's Bloody Chamber Through Gender Roles

#### [Printable Version](http://ayjw.org/print_articles.php?id=656864&title=Fem%20Fatal%20and%20Freaky%20Foresters%20-%20An%20Analysis%20of%20Angela%20Carter's%20Bloody%20Chamber%20Through%20Gender%20Roles)

### By Anne Banfich

Fem Fatal and Freaky Foresters

       Throughout Angela Carter’s works, there is a good deal of attention and care given to articulating the gender roles of each of her characters. In one of her modern adaptations of Little Red Riding Hood, Carter addresses sexuality in a way that challenges conventional perceptions of young women and voids the implications of the former child-aimed Little Red adaptations. By bringing sexuality and gender roles to the forefront of a fairytale world, Carter puts a new, modern, and disturbing spin on the old connotations of adolescent innocence and asks readers to look for a deeper societal message in her writings. The Company of Wolves is a direct attempt by Carter to not only challenge gender stereotypes in fairy tales, but to convey a larger message about naiveté and personal responsibility that the older stories never state, making her modern fable more relevant to today’s youth and challenging to the glossed over era of old-world, male dominated sexuality.
       The opening passage of Carter’s dark tale begins with detailed parallels between men, wolves, and punishment. She talks of men who cheated on wives and were turned into wolves; hungry, lonely, unreligious and harsh beings who induce fear in all people therefore producing the jarring image of children with sharp knives at the ready.  “Fear and flee the wolf” she says “for worst of all, [he] may be worse than he seems” (Carter 111). She portrays men as the “carnivore incarnate” repetitively and shows them as savage, lusty, rabid beings who are all “starving” (Carter 112). As the tale progresses, she personifies them, making the wolves seem lonely and lost. They are always infected with lice, or an itch that needs care. They are transforming constantly, in pain and anguish. This look at the male psyche, which, she boldly states, is where her intentions lie, creates an undeniable link between the wild wolves and the domesticated man of the modern world. The reference to a woman “once bitten in her own kitchen as she was straining macaroni” (Carter 111) makes one think about the domesticity of the action and therefore the wolf as a very real home predator. She asks for readers to question conventional stereotypes. Her tale of a man trapping and killing a wolf that turned out to be a man only reinforces this image and sets Carter up to defy gender roles in the tale that follows and create an aura around men that is less than conventional and noticeably subordinate in nature. Statements such as “once he‘s had the taste of flesh, nothing else will do“ (Carter 110) and “worst of all he cannot listen to reason” (Carter 111) are frightening in context and leave no room for question in this blatant link between the wild wolves and the male sex.
       The fact that men are portrayed as wolves is not, at first, very flattering, but as Carter delves into the psyche of the male, she reveals them as lonely and misplaced. They are seen as lost because society has labeled them as a form of social taboo. Carter attempts to say that men are insecure about themselves and that there seems to be no alternative for them other than to go “howl“. The wolf becomes a social construct that Carter sees it as rabid but controllable, such as when she says “only immaculate flesh appeases him” (Carter 118) but a girl could “lay his fearful head on her lap” (Carter 118). Here too Carter‘s “postmodern feminism confronts the violence inherent in these narratives that construct and regulate gender and sexuality, exposing misleading totalities inherent in fairy tales, myths, and other such dominant narratives” (Brooke 18) and poses a thought to the reader about the nature of man, woman, and humanity as a race.
       Carter’s attitude toward women in this tale is empowering, but it is also historically attempting to influence the third wave feminist attitude before it started. She demonstrates that fear of men is not an option by using the examples such as men hunting for a woman’s pursuer and a husband that runs off only to show up and expect life to go back as it was. Carter argues that a woman should be aware, but not reliant. It seems as though she is daring women to be conscious of their sexuality, but also confident and competent in their actions and ideas. Little Red “knew she was nobodies meat” (Carter 118) and “burst out laughing” (Carter 118) at the wolf’s arrogance and supercilious notions of control. Carter has her strip for him, undress him, control him, and console him. While feminists may argue this act of catering is sexist and submissive, the scene also encourages power of the will. Literary critics agree that “social representation of gender affects its subjective construction and the subjective representation of gender - or self-representation - affects its social construction, thus tautologically limiting possibilities for agency and self-determination” (Brooke 1) making Carter quite a profound theorist in the ways of femininity and philosophy. She questioned social issues that her generation had somehow brushed over in the midst of their revolution. Through this simple tale, Brooke claims that Carter challenges a world view. Little Red Riding Hood was trapped, so she took advantage of what had at her disposal to subdue the wolf; her sexuality. She initiates everything. She has control. She puts women on a different level than men and in a way that has not been widely accepted as of yet.
       The focus given to the moon has sexual significance in this tale and reinforces Carter‘s gender bending ideals. The introduction tells the reader that Little Red has just “started her woman’s bleeding” (Carter 113), a clock that would “henceforth strike once a month” (Carter 113). This attention to time is relevant because of the monthly pattern of the full moon that also possesses werewolves. When the moon completes it’s cycle, the men have a primal reaction which seems, in Carter’s tale, to imply a male parallel to menstruation, or change in attitude and coming into a primal state. This version of a former fairytale insinuates that embracing ones sex is natural and that following feelings is a form of equalization in the primal actions of humans and animals.
       Taking a just-of-age girl and an aroused male and connecting them through symbolism and nature make Carter’s point not so much Feminist, but equal-ist, giving the woman as much power and sex drive as the man and putting her, regardless of age, on equal opportunity footing with him. The implication of the natural progression of these events is bold, even in this modern world where women are still constantly battling for consistency in respect and pay, but Carter argues that embracing sexuality, for both men and women, is the only natural way to start this change in social constructs. Both men and women are typecast by each other and by themselves. It has been proven time and time again in movies, literature, and documented actions that men are considered the aggressor and very, very different from women. Men are the pursuers and women are the victims. Men are more animalistic, wild, and more willing to succumb to natural desire while women suppress it. Carter addresses men and woman as both susceptible to all of this, but shows the woman in control of her transformation, making her fundamentally different from man and independent in a new sexual way, free from submission.
       The title of the story itself argues Carter’s gender constraint liberation case again. “Company” implies something congenial, something enjoyable, as we see on Little Red’s journey to her grandmother. She is in the company of a wolf, a man, and a sexual being. “Company” also has a connotation implying a more subtle understandings of one’s inner, or personal life, or whom someone is sleeping with. It is safe to say, then, that Carter plays on words here, not only through her long warning introduction about the prevalence of wolves, or the encounter on the way to grandma, but also of the personal life one leads on their own terms creating an innuendo that carries a larger insinuation about the capacity for women have to control their lives and their desires and of the prevalence of “wolves” in the world arguably making her one of the “wolf pack” and throwing gender structure out the window.
       Another key issue that is addressed by Carter’s bold attempts to rectify human inequities is the destruction of the grandmother. Through her demise, there is a certain ending of an era. The loss of her presence and the way in which she departed from the story asks the reader to look closely at the implications. The grandmother was devoured, or used until she had nothing left to give but her echoing lessons of moral character as is seen in the “old bones [that] set up a terrible clattering” (Carter 118) while Little Red is, presumably, embracing her sexuality and does “not pay them any heed” (Carter 118). Here, old world mentality is literally shoved under the bed. Grandmother was dependant on others, namely men, such as the boy who came to light her fire, and Little Red sees this as an error in lifestyle.
       As the “ Bible lay closed on the table” (Carter 117), Little Red proceeds to live on her own terms without guidance from any outside source. Throwing the symbols of her youth into the fire solidify that her naiveté is “gone for good” (Carter 118), showing her complete assurance in her loss of virginity. Red Ridding Hood ignores her grandmother’s ominous advice and reacts in the extreme opposite way, leaving the Bible and grandmother’s lessons in the past. Carter may be making an assertion here about generation gaps and how reactionary people are to extremism. Possibly a current political commentary, or from Carter’s own hippie era, granny’s conservatism falls on deaf ears as Little Red lives her life in the liberal, and proverbial, fast lane.
       Carter’s gendered tale of empowerment even spawned the 1984 Angela Lansbury film The Company of Wolves that was dubbed “Not for kids!” and  “a magical bag full of symbolic folklore about werewolves, or, rather, their sexual connotation” (In The Company of Wolves). Carter’s message has had a global impact. She challenges societal ideals that still exist after the cultural revolution and the progressive attitudes toward women in the modern world have developed. It is said “Carter writes the same way the actual world is perceived: anthropocentrically” (Pollock 2). She put post-modernism and realism into fairy tales. She is empowering in her rhetoric and intriguing in content.  She offers suggestions to the equality seekers of the world and encourages all people to embrace who they are. She offers men a chance to see how they are perceived and women a chance to change their place in the world. Her attempt to address gender roles and cross gender stereotypes are literarily potent and conventional, making the story that much more important to the modern world. Carter says that “the eyes alone are unchanged by metamorphosis” (Carter 113), urging the reader a chance to make eye contact and learn a lesson through any situation.